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ABSTRACT

The main argument for the inclusion of the history of adult education in the study of adult education and in the training of adult educators is that it can provide inspiration for some adult educators and insight and understanding for most. Although study of the history of adult education does not provide a detailed guide or formulas for success, it has great educational value in the development of wisdom, attitudes, and perspective. Therefore, a strong case for its inclusion in the training of adult educators can be made. However, it is not at present a major provision in Britain. The main obstacles to teaching the history of adult education are a lack of general historical knowledge among trainees, a shortage of teachers competent in the subject, and a lack of adequate time available for history in training courses at any level. (Some examples of problems and methods in teaching adult educational history are provided.) (KC)

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THE PLACE OF THE HISTORY OF ADULT EDUCATION IN THE STUDY OF ADULT EDUCATION AND IN THE TRAINING OF ADULT EDUCATORS

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ABSTRACT

This paper suggests that the main arguments for the inclusion of the history of adult education are that it can provide inspiration for some adult educators, and insight and understanding for most. Though not providing a detailed guide or formulae for success, it has great educational value in the development of wisdom, attitudes and perspective.

There is therefore a strong case for its inclusion in the training of adult educators although at present in Britain it is not a major provision. The main problems encountered are a lack of general historical knowledge among trainees, a shortage of teachers competent in the subject, and a lack of adequate time available for history in training courses at any level. Some examples are given of problems and methods.

Derek Legge

May 1986

THE PLACE OF THE HISTORY OF ADULT EDUCATION IN THE STUDY OF ADULT EDUCATION AND IN THE TRAINING OF ADULT EDUCATORS

Derek Legge

In Britain, as elsewhere, the study of the history of adult education has been subject to much critical attack. Sometimes this seems to have been associated with a general rejection of history as a 'useless' subject, perhaps of interest to a few pedants but of no help in solving the problems of present day activities. Psychology and sociology, or some combination of these, have had a rising tide of popularity as the 'real' sources of useful knowledge, and only relatively recently have doubts been cast on the merits of a preoccupation with motivation, participation and techniques. Perhaps the pendulum is now beginning to swing more towards the value of history and its place in any serious study of adult education. Certainly some of the doubters are beginning to look at it with more interest, and to speculate about its contribution even while they retain their faith in their old gods.

In analysing that contribution it may be useful to begin with a negative statement, an indication of what the study of the history of adult education is not designed to achieve. It is not suggested, for example, that a study of the historical background will provide a detailed guide and a set of answers to present problems. History is not a medical book giving remedies, however much some individuals have tried to find them. There is, of course, a very human temptation to find a 'plan' - perhaps the greatest example lies in Toynbee's 'Study of History' - and indeed we all have a tendency to look at the situation in this sort of way, viewing it through coloured glasses and ending up often with oversimplified distortions of the truth. The search for formulae appears to be a preoccupation in the modern world, as common among

sociologists as it is with scientists, but, though Marxists would no doubt disagree, there is little evidence to support any idea of a logical process moving forward to an inevitable end. Sometimes the story has resemblances but it is never an exact repetition, and there is some danger in looking for the 'lessons of history'. Too many, it seems, go where their preconceived ideas lead them: rather like H.G.Wells who, it has been said, went to the past to look for the future and of course found it ... With A.J.P. Taylor, I tend to think that much development is the result of pure chance, and like H.A.L. Fisher I can find "no plot, rhythm or predetermined pattern" but "in the development of human destinies only the play of the contingent and the unforeseen" (Fisher, 1935). Thus, although changes in twentieth century membership, type of course and type of subject in the British Workers' Educational Association have certain similarities to the changes in the mechanics' institutes and university extension provision in the nineteenth century, it is quite untenable to suggest that the W.E.A. has inevitably followed the same road and will continue to do so.

There are in fact two main arguments in favour of a secure place for the study of the history of adult education. Firstly it can be asserted that some find it extremely interesting - indeed fascinating; and that for them it provides the same kind of inspiration or driving force which others get from political or religious beliefs, or from deeply felt concepts of social or moral needs. If adult educators are to work satisfactorily, they must be supported by some kind of inspirational conviction. It may be true that relatively few at present are helped to this by the study of the history of adult education but one can speculate on what may be possible in future. Perhaps there is a need for imaginative, more readable histories of adult education? Or does the real problem lie deeper in attitudes engendered in the schools and in the community at large? If so this would suggest the need for a radical review

of history teaching. It can be argued that the appeal of history is emotional as well as intellectual, and that we need more than an accumulation of facts portrayed with colourless 'scientific' impartiality. The good historian, in re-creating or interpreting the past, has to rely primarily on imagination and build a story, however tentative. Such writing would be more inspirational than some present offerings.

The main case for the study of the history of adult education, however, lies in the insight and understanding it can give to adult educators. Though Lord Acton is reported as saying at one time that "our studies ought to be all but purposeless - pursued with chastity-like mathematics" - he went on to declare that "the knowledge of the past, the record of truths revealed by experience, is eminently practical, is an instrument of action and a power that goes to the making of the future" (Acton 1912 ed). Peers also held to the view that "if the movement (for adult education) is to be understood, it must be seen in the light of its past history and against the background of social change" (Peers, 1958, p.3). To look at the way in which human beings have reacted to a situation, have tried to deal with problems, and have met with varying degrees of success and failure, can throw a flood of light upon the ways in which men and women today are trying to meet their own situations and difficulties. New factors - or new variants on old factors - do, of course, appear from time to time, but there seems little to suggest much change in human emotional responses or reactions. To look, for example, at the development of the mechanics' institutes and to examine the reactions of leading citizens towards them may lead to a fuller understanding of the reactions of present day people in power in local government when faced with proposals for new centres of adult education. Similarly a study of the motives of those offered adult educational opportunities in the past may give much insight into the reactions of present day citizens. Human responses,

indeed, seem often to echo through the ages. At a time when Ernest Green wrote a book entitled 'Adult Education - Why This Apathy?' (Green, 1953) it was interesting to discover that the Ayr Advertiser, published in the west of Scotland about a hundred years earlier, had devoted a leading article to a statement attributing the failure of the local working men's college to the "apathy of the working classes" (Legge, 1952).

Today is based on yesterday and tomorrow will be superimposed on today. We need to comprehend that historical antecedents have helped to shape the present and if we are to have satisfactory action in adult education, it must be based on understanding and on a hard foundation of factual knowledge, instead of on the dreams and the over-tidy theories of people who are all too often horrified by the real world. What stands out in the history of adult education is the complexity of the process and the great multiplicity of factors and human facets which come into play. As Trevelyan said, "the value of history is not scientific. Its true value is educational. It can educate the minds of men by causing them to reflect on the past" (Trevelyan, 1919). Some adult educators are often impatient of quick results and reluctant to believe that their plans and schemes will not inevitably come to fruition. By looking at the past they can become more realistic, perhaps calmer in times of difficulty, and perhaps rather sceptical of any automatic linking of cause and effect. Certainly they can come to realise the slowness of attitude change, the unforeseen imperfections of carefully laid plans and the complex implications of human ignorance and resistance to change. They may also, perhaps, draw some comfort from the efforts of earlier generations of adult educators, and by attempting to understand the tangled variety of human life come to a greater tolerance for - though not necessarily a condonation of - the many different views they meet. Those concerned with

efforts to train adult educators would gain much from a study of the vicissitudes in the experiences of their predecessors from the time of Griffith Jones in eighteenth century Wales (see Kelly, 1950) to the proposals put out in 1928 by the British Institute of Adult Education and the Tutors' Association (British Institute 1928).

There are also many issues which, even if not a direct heritage of the nineteenth century, are still conditioned by the attitudes and ideas then engendered, and a study of the historical background to these is of particular importance to organisers and administrators of adult education. Examples are the concepts of technical education in Britain held both in local authorities and in industry, views on the 'marginal' place of adult education - and hence the amount of money which should be spent on it -, conflicting views on the relative functions of statutory authorities, the universities, voluntary agencies and private enterprise, and ideas about student participation in the government and organisation of educational provision for adults.

Both the general public and governmental circles in Britain tend to retain concepts about the nature of education and its purposes which have remained virtually unchanged since the nineteenth century, however little they match the conditions of the changing modern world. Thus action still is often based on the idea that education is essentially for the young and that it should be concerned only with cognitive material, 'useful' facts and information to be 'taught'. If adult educators are to lead the way forward from these outdated but prevalent traditional views, it is essential that they should understand their roots, and also attempts earlier this century to escape from the mould. They might even take some heart from the breadth of experience gained in some parts of the army during the Second World War where not infrequently there were fresh and unorthodox approaches and radical ideas about the place of adult

education. Similarly, looking back forty years to the once famous Ministry of Education (England and Wales) 1947 pamphlet No 8 on 'Further Education', they could find much more vision that appears to be exhibited by the present United Kingdom government. Though the 200 page 'Pamphlet' rather rigidly separated 'Preparation for Work' from ' Learning for Leisure', it declared that even in the former the need was "twofold: to produce both skill and social leadership. It is necessary that workers should be skilled to meet the highly specialized demands of industry and commerce in a scientific age ... In addition to possessing technical knowledge, however, men and women must also have an understanding of everyday human relationships ... success in industry will depend upon the qualities of personality no less than upon acquired knowledge " (Ministry of Education, 1947, para. 22, p. 13). In declaring that the task of the local education authorities in England and Wales was to "assume leadership in the co-operative enterprise of community education" (ibid., page 12), it stressed the need for a "wide extension of the educational and social resources making for individual happiness and for a civilised community" (ibid, page 32). Adult educators reflecting wryly on the present narrow interpretations of 'work-related' education might gain much support from the arguments in the Pamphlet, and perhaps even some ammunition.

Despite the stress on practical techniques in some quarters, more people are now asserting that the development of insight and understanding is the major objective in the training of adult educators, whether these are teachers or organisers or administrators. From what has been said above, therefore, it seems obvious that the history of adult education could make a major contribution. Sometimes, indeed, perhaps particularly in America, there is an impression that British adult educators are preoccupied with the historical origins of adult education. People point to the existence of several master's and doctoral theses, and to articles in 'Studies in Adult Education' on aspects of the history

of adult education, and note the deservedly high reputation of Kelly's 'A History of Adult Education in Great Britain' (Kelly, 1962/1970) as well as his other historical works. A detailed analysis of the situation, however, suggests that the impression is false. The SCUTREA compendium (SCUTREA, 1983) of the provision of university courses for adult educators in Great Britain and Eire, shows that courses or options available for the study of the history of adult education are relatively few in number, in contrast to the almost universal inclusion of aspects of the psychology of adult learning and of studies of techniques and methods. Possibly some history is hidden under other titles, but less that a quarter of the universities offering advanced Diploma or Master's degrees in adult education list the history of adult education in their course contents. A few universities stand out, notably Liverpool and Hull, while in Leicester there is an approach through the 'history of education' at Diploma level and through the history of ideas at Master's level. Similarly in the listing of dissertations and theses in progress which I carried out in the years 1972 to 1977, history is a minority feature. In the list for 1976-77 for example there were 35 entries out of a total of 495 (Legge, 1977) and alas not all of these were completed. In Manchester in 1975-76 where there were 180 students engaged upon post-graduate (graduate) study only half a dozen were concerned with enquiries into the history of adult education. 'Adult education', it should be noted, is interpreted widely to mean all forms of educational activity undertaken by adults.

Outside the universities, training at non-graduate level makes occasional reference to the historical context, but this tends to include only the immediate past and to be much more concerned with present day structures and organisation. The Further Education Teacher's Certificate, provided by the City and Guilds of London Institute (course 730), for example, is mainly

concerned with the principles and methods of teaching and learning, and, despite a statement of purpose which includes the development of the personal qualities of the teacher, it makes no reference at all to history. Much the same can be said of the training schemes arranged by the Regional Advisory Councils in England, although in Stage III of the scheme in the North West, there is a sixty hour module on 'The Organisation and History of Post-School Education in Britain' (NWRAC, 1982).

Clearly many in Britain as yet remain unconvinced by the case for the value of the history of adult education in the training of adult educators. There are indeed a number of difficult problems. Anyone trying to introduce the study of the history of adult education to students taking the university courses is immediately faced by a stark and sobering truth: most of the students have almost no historical knowledge of any kind. Overseas students are in fact often much more knowledgeable about British history than are the British, who may have vague memories of 1066 but little else. This is not the place in which to comment fully on the causes of this situation, but from a practical point of view it implies that the story of adult education cannot be related to existing student knowledge of the framework of the social, economic and political developments to which, by its nature, it is so closely tied. Moreover, ignorance about events prior to their own adult lifetime, and of course a lack of any concept of historical method, often leads students to either a slavish search for 'answers to problems', or to an attempt to assimilate vast amounts of detail, or to a defensively hostile attitude. The protest cry of 'Why history?' seems to some students the only answer they can give to demands for which they can see little justication. For them the past has gone and they believe that the answers to their current problems lie elsewhere. As James Hole no doubt would have said, they are "steeped in the grossest ignorance" (Hole, 1860) and likely to indulge in dangerous oversimplifications.

To this problem can be related that of relatively few staff able to help students learn about the history of adult education. Not all university departments of adult education have historians on their staff and the provision of courses in the history of adult education seems often the direct result of the presence of one or two individuals qualified in history. These may well have to fight for the provision against the conflicting claims of others who want more time for their own subject area and who do not regard a sense of the history of the field as a major priority.

Against this background, the amount of time which can be given to a study of the history of adult education is itself a major problem. How much time would be required to give someone without historical knowledge even a working framework on which to build? Or to provide a stimulus and enthusiasm for future study? Looking back, I can see that lack of time at least partly caused relative failure in a long trail of attempts to provide some study of the historical background. A few examples may illustrate this. In one of my early courses in Manchester - a 40 hour evening course on "The Pattern of Adult Education" in the session 1949-50 - about eight hours were given to the period from the mechanics' institutes to the early WEA. In the next session this amount was almost halved, and in the autumn of 1951 I could only offer a brief four meeting evening course bravely entitled "The Quest for Knowledge - the Story of Adult Education in Britain". Eight hours to look at two centuries or more ... and all for a fee of 3 shillings and sixpence (17½p in modern terms) per student. The session 1952-53 saw an attempt to devote more time to history with a course on the 'History and Significance of British Adult Education' in which ten meetings (20 hours) were given to the period before 1900 and six (12 hours) to the period 1900 - 1950. This attempted to meet the needs of students taking the new 'Diploma in Education' which had been introduced in 1951 and in which adult education could contribute rather more than half the total study. This course

later became more stabilised in a 40 hour course on 'The History and Organisation of Adult Education' but sadly with the historical content reduced to a quarter or less, a situation which continued when the separate advanced Diploma in Adult Education was launched in 1961. The position today is that, except for Liverpool University's M.Ed. provision, almost all the courses offered are similarly restricted.

Lack of time and lack of resources, human or material, may be regarded as the major factors when assessing the value of the study of the history of adult education in the personal and professional development of adult educators. The amount of factual historical knowledge which can be assimilated in an advanced Diploma or Master's course is likely to be not very significant. I have come to think, therefore, that the main objectives should be to stimulate an interest which will lead on to future historical studies and exploration, and to use discussions about historical features as a way of leading to a new approach to work in the field. The historical record is rarely complete enough to enable a rounded final picture to be produced and an emphasis on this aspect in itself can be useful in revealing to the over-dogmatic the uncertainties and difficulties experienced in trying to get the whole evidence. Looking at the problems of interpretation can also lead some to re-examine their own prejudices.

Even so, the present place of the history of adult education in training must inevitably be somewhat limited and the main question is how to make the maximum use of the resources which are available. In Manchester, where all course members were experienced adult educators in mid-career with an average age of 35 to 40, it seemed helpful to begin by providing a framework in the form of duplicated documents summarising the general social, economic and political history of Britain in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It proved difficult, if

not impossible, however, to find enough time in the programme for adequate discussion of even the main features. Inevitably, too, there is a danger in this process of producing many sweeping generalisations which in turn may reinforce undesirable attitudes among the non-historians, even if combined with the reading of one of the standard social and economic histories. In terms of stimulus I have come to think it preferable to indicate briefly the main developments in the history of adult education and then to examine a select number of case studies, often drawn from the Manchester area and/or from research. In this way students can be encouraged, for example, to look at various questions related to

1. Causes. What caused this particular development? What were the effects of the conditions of the time, either local or national? How much depended on individual enterprise and personal effort? What were the motives of the entrepreneurs etc.
2. The main features and characteristics. In what way did these answer the needs of the situation and the purposes put forward? What factors influenced the organisation, staffing, membership, finance etc.
3. Weaknesses and difficulties. What were the problems, and why? How complex was the situation etc.
4. Results and achievements. What were the short-term and long-term results? How far is it possible to estimate these etc.

Obviously in this approach, the most important question is why?

This kind of exercise leads more to imaginative speculation about the past than to detailed historical knowledge but this may be of considerable value to personal growth and attitude change. Some may be stimulated to continue the study of the history of adult education throughout their career, but for most of the adult educators on courses, perhaps the best that time will allow is for

them to develop a better perspective, a certain scepticism about quick and easy results, and a greater tolerance and understanding of alternative answers to the problems of their own work. From history they can glean more experience and more wisdom. This in itself justifies every attempt to include the history of adult education in all programmes of training for adult educators.

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